Art as a Catalyst for Conversation

women in NATURAL RESOURCES

Spring 2003

By Vivian Simon-Brown, Brad Withrow-Robinson,
Molly Engle, Scott Reed, and Shorna Broussard

Scene: Oregon State University Extension Forestry Faculty planning retreat, 1999.

Colleague 1: (Incredulous tone of voice.) *You want to do an ART SHOW?*

Team Member: *Yes, an educational art show.*

Colleague 1: *An ART SHOW?*

Team Member: *Yes, really, an art show.*

Colleague 2: *What do foresters know about art?*

Team Member: *Not much.*

Colleague 1: *So why would foresters want to do an art show?*

Team Member: *Glad you asked*.

Since this scene unfolded four years ago, we have come up with an ever-increasing number of good answers to that question:

> Because Oregon State University Extension Foresters communicate effectively with our traditional audiences—industrial and family forestlands owners—but we don't connect as well with members of the general public.
>
> Because debate over forestry issues is more confrontational than conversational.
>
> Because our increasingly urbanized general public is becoming more and more involved in natural resource policy decisions.
>
> Because for years we've been telling the public what we want them to know about forestry. For a change, how about listening to what the public is telling us? We need to know what Oregonians value and want from their forests.
>
> Because art is immediate, evokes emotions, and can transcend cultures and values. It elicits reactions that conventional Extension education methods simply cannot. It can be a catalyst for conversation, sparking discussion while buffering personal attacks.
>
> Because we've never done anything like this before.

Since the first discussions among our team in 1999 we've offered annual exhibitions titled "Seeing the Forest: Art about Forests & Forestry." Over 150,000 people have viewed the show in twelve communities. We've shown 115 art images—valued at over $62,000—created by 53 Northwest artists. We've received several national and regional awards. And most important, we've engaged the public in dialog about forests and forestry issues.

In this article, we'd like to acquaint you with some of the methods we used, describe how we evaluated the show's effectiveness, highlight our results, and share some things we learned along the way.

Core Concepts

"Seeing the Forest" is innovative, but it is fundamentally an educational program and we took a systematic approach in developing it. First, we identified our target audiences as the general public with little awareness of forestry issues. Second, to effectively engage the public in dialog, we had to put the art "in the public's way." To accomplish this goal our show travels to different communities around Oregon, and is displayed in public places such as libraries and government buildings.

The content plan is the educational foundation of the exhibit. It serves as the template for each show, and the planning team selects art that conveys specific resource values or management practices. For the first two years, we took a "broad brush" approach. We included portrayals of wildlife habitat, aesthetic beauty, harvest methods, jobs, forest health, recreational use, water resources, fire, conflict resolution and urban encroachment.

For our third show in 2002, "Seeing the Forest" was subtitled "Supporting the American Dream" and we focused on a specific theme: How Oregonians, by our actions as consumers, are linked to and have an impact on forests and forest practices. To investigate this theme, we highlighted three issues:

1. the level of demand for forest products,

2. that environmental problems may be "exported" to other regions when meeting this demand,

3. the dilemma faced if switching to substitutes for wood products, all of which also have significant environmental impacts.

Besides including art to illustrate a topical content plan, we made an effort to include different ecological and geographical representations. Through our Call for Submissions to all art guilds and newspapers in Oregon and through our juried selection process, we sought a variety of artistic media for each show, including photography, watercolor, ceramic sculptures, oils, Native American-style carvings, fiber arts (quilts and paper) and furniture. We've even included folk art such as painted saws and painted rocks. Don't laugh too hard—that painted rock was priced at $2,800!

Another core concept for our art show is the evaluation component. We include a brief questionnaire in the brochure that's readily available to viewers. Viewers are asked to respond anonymously and place the completed questionnaires in a box. While such a sampling is self-selected, the wide range of responses we receive suggests that the self-selection bias is minimal.

Creating and using multiple lines of communication with viewers of the art show has been an intriguing challenge. How many ways could we provide for dialog? The art itself is the first line of communication. Each artist provides visual messages. In addition, most artists write explanatory statements that accompany their artwork. Our brochure is another way for us to communicate our intentions. We also include educational text panels interspersed throughout the show.

Equally important, we give viewers multiple ways to communicate with us. Besides the questionnaire for formal feedback, viewers can share their thoughts informally with other viewers by posting their written comments on strategically located corkboards. And in addition to these asynchronous opportunities for dialog, public receptions bring the artists, the public, and our Extension foresters into confluence for real conversation.

Viewers Respond

While more than 150,000 people have viewed the shows, approximately 2% offered informal comments, and 1% completed the formal questionnaire (see Table 1, page 28). These respondents have provided valuable information about their "Seeing the Forest" experience. Using data from the 2000 show, here are selected statistics from the formal viewer responses to the questionnaire:

- 86 % thought "Seeing the Forest" successfully illustrated the diversity of forest issues in Oregon.

- 77 % agreed or strongly agreed that viewing "Seeing the Forest" increased their understanding of the complexity of forest issues.

- 70 % or more correctly identified specific content elements in the show.

In 2000, the questionnaire also contained two open-ended questions:

- Which art image did you like best? Why?
- Which art image did you find the most intriguing or thought-provoking? Why?

Sixty-five percent of the viewers who completed the questionnaire responded to these last questions. Interestingly, of the 53 art pieces in that particular show, all but three were specifically mentioned at least once. That seems to tell us that the show was varied enough to appeal to a wide audience; there was something for everyone.

A large oil painting by Stev Ominski, titled "Predator," prompted the most comments from viewers and it was at the top of most viewers' "best-liked image" list. It was also at the top of the "most thought-provoking image" list. However, we dubbed it "the painting people loved to hate," because of the vehemence of the informal comments we received.

Analyses of viewers' responses indicates that we have been successful in achieving our goals of reaching new audiences, increasing awareness of the complexity of forest issues, providing a conducive environment for dialog and challenging existing perspectives, and gaining insight into what the general public values and believes about forests and forestry (for a more detailed analysis and discussion, see Withrow-Robinson et al., 2002, "Seeing the Forest: Art About Forests & Forestry," Journal of Forestry 100 (Dec. 2002): 8-14.) Informal conversations with the artists, volunteers, local hosts, and steering committee members for each show attest to the value of the project.

Lessons Learned

First, we learned that people care deeply about their forests. Viewers gave their strongly opinionated feedback to us on how they felt about forests and forestry issues. Second, we were taken aback by the polarity of viewer statements. One viewer would write "Predator is fabulous!" while another would state "I HATE Predator!" Sometimes, we received comments we didn't want to hear. Some viewers called the show "too biased toward primal nature" while others claimed, "This show is all about logging. Why don't you show some real forests?"

Several times, viewer comments would catch us off guard: "Fish are not forestry! What are salmon images doing in a show about trees?" And, "I don't get why you have a book and a three-legged table in an exhibit about forestry." Some comments were funny: "Hooray for trees! Three cheers for oxygen." Others were ironic: "I noticed that the 'anti-logging art' pieces are all mounted in wood frames . . . hmmm."

We learned that a thoughtful dialog could take place asynchronously. One series of corkboard comments depicts this well:

- I don't like the trees being cut down. Trees give us air.
- Where do you think the wood for your house came from?
- I think people are too harsh. Our forests are really valuable, and it's important that we do care. They are a renewable resource but it takes a long time to grow one tree. It's important that we don't get careless.
- Yes, renewable—but only when used wisely. Past practices should be learned from, not repeated. It [the forest] was here thousands of years before us, and should be here for thousands more!
- Logging is necessary, we need the wood to build, but we also need to let the old growth alone!
- Anti-logging propaganda does no one a service other than spreading falsehoods and an unrealistic reality.
- I've read all the comments here and I don't see any anti-logging comments except the first one. People are just saying, "Be careful, use it well."

Organizing an art show has been a real education for us, too! We've learned what a juried show is. We now know what gouache, sugar lift, dry point, and silver gelatin printing are—well, sort of. We can speak quite appreciatively about perspective, color juxtaposition and composition. And most important, we've developed great admiration for that wondrous ability artists have to capture images of feelings, place and time.

All the shows have featured high quality artwork and we learned that artists know their craft as well as we know ours. We also learned the obvious lesson that artists are part of the "general public." Most are urbanites and (with some exceptions) have no working connection to, and little firsthand knowledge of, forestry. Their awareness and impressions of forests and forestry issues often reflect commonly held public beliefs, sometimes limiting our ability to include depictions of certain issues.

We learned the pitfalls unique to an art show. Temporarily "losing" the $2,800 painted rock underscored the need for risk management assessment—and for careful packing. A 60-lb carrying crate taught us to institute a weight limit. "What do you mean we can't hang anything on the walls?" reinforced our commitment to clear communication and having a local host to help organize the details.

And we've learned the disappointing lesson that many of our colleagues are at best ambivalent to this project—and to engaging the public in dialog. While we acknowledge that the creators of "Seeing the Forest" could be described as unconventional, we have been dismayed by the minimal interest exhibited by our more mainstream forestry colleagues. Obviously, we need to engage in dialog with ourselves, too.

Conclusion

> It's encouraging to see you've found a way to defuse some otherwise hot issues and allow most people to step back and appreciate a variety of perspective.
> —comment from a 1999 viewer

Our experiences with "Seeing the Forest" have taught us that reaching out to new audiences requires taking new educational approaches. The art show has moved our Forestry Extension program forward and become a mechanism for us to engage individuals and communities in dialog about natural resource issues. Ultimately, the impact of this initiative may assist in development of forestry policies grounded more in understanding and appreciation of important issues, rather than emotional and unprocessed reactions. As natural resource professionals, we need to be prepared to listen and learn as well as talk and teach, and approach such projects with an open mind and a creative spirit.

Scene: Oregon State University Extension Forestry Faculty planning retreat, 2002.

Colleague 1: *You want to do a PLAY?*

Team Member: *Yes, a live, professionally produced and performed play.*

Colleague 1: *A PLAY?*

Team Member: *Yes, really, a play.*

Colleague 1: *What do foresters know about plays?*

Team Member: *Not much.*

Colleague 1: *Why would foresters want to do a play?*

Team Member: *Glad you asked. . . .*

The current "Seeing the Forest" steering committee includes: Trisha Wymore, OSU Master Woodland Manager coordinator; Joe Holmberg, OSU Forestry Outreach; Scott Reed, Viviane Simon-Brown and Brad

Withrow-Robinson. The 2002 show ended in February 2003. For the next annual show, the steering committee is considering adding a youth component, and exploring the idea of creating a virtual show to increase public dialogue.

Viviane Simon-Brown, an Associate Professor in Oregon State University Forestry Extension, trains community members in capacity building, and directs the Sustainable Living Project at OSU. She previously worked in public process, environmental education, and college administration. Contact her at viviane.simon-brown@oregonstate.edu.

Brad Withrow-Robinson, Ph.D., is the OSU Extension Forester for Polk, Marion and Yamhill Counties. He has worked overseas and enjoys the challenge of working with communities with diverse viewpoints. Contact him at brad.withrow-robinson@oregonstate.edu.

Molly Engle, Ph.D., is Evaluation and Grants Specialist for OSU Extension Service and Associate Professor of Public Health. She has planned, designed, implemented, and reported community-based educational interventions for over 20 years, and has served as president of the American Evaluation Association. Contact her at molly.engle@oregonstate.edu.

Scott Reed, P.h.D, is Extension Forestry program leader and Associate Dean, OSU College of Forestry. He is the incoming president of ANREP, the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals. Contact him at scott.reed@oregonstate.edu.

Shorna Broussard, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Forestry and Natural Resources at Purdue University. Dr. Broussard's current research program focuses on understanding human attitudes, motivations, and behavior related to natural resource conservation and management. Contact her at srb@fnr.purdue.edu.